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# “I do not know if Mum knew what was going on”: Social reproduction in boarding schools in Soviet Lapland

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*Biographical note:* Lukas Allemann is an anthropologist and historian at the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland (Finland). He is currently finishing his PhD thesis on the history and consequences of social engineering among Northern indigenous minorities in the Soviet Union, on the example of the relocations among the Sámi people, using mainly oral history methods. He holds a master's degree from the University of Basel (Switzerland) in Eastern European history and Russian language and literature.

## Abstract

This inquiry into the history of boarding schools for indigenous and quasi-indigenous, tundra-connected children in the Soviet part of Lapland tries to answer why children were sent to a boarding school despite their parents living in the same village, and also why an additional school for mentally disabled children, a school half as big as the boarding school for ‘regular’ children, was opened. Data from oral history interviews among former pupils and teachers, both indigenous and incomers, are combined with archival materials. Using the concepts of cynical knowledge as well as the Bourdieuan notions of social exclusion and reproduction, concealed functions of the boarding school system are identified, among which are the attenuation of housing shortage and the operation of the school out of economic interests, alongside with ethnocentric and paternalist patterns. The stigmatisation of mostly Sámi children from relocated families as mentally disabled is set in a frame of individualisation of the negative, which sought to present failures of the state’s social engineering as personal fallibility.

*Keywords:* Sámi; Komi; Boarding school; Russia; Soviet Union; Oral History; Special education; Kola Peninsula

## Introduction

This article is primarily about the role of the so-called *remedial boarding school* (Russ. *vspomogatel'naia shkola-internat*, henceforth RBS) during late Soviet times in Lovozero, in the Murmansk Region, North-Western Russia. This type of school existed there during the 1970s and 1980s alongside with the so-called *native boarding school* (*natsional'naia shkola-internat*, henceforth NBS), a school designed mainly for local Sámi and Komi children. Remedial schools were a specific type of school for children with mental disabilities and existed all throughout the Soviet Union. I will focus on the school of this type in the village of Lovozero, a multi-ethnic rural settlement on the Kola Peninsula, which, since the 1960s, had become the main place of residence of the Russian Sámi. Data collection for this article was done within the research project ORHELIA (Oral History of Empires by Elders in the Arctic),<sup>1</sup> which deals with oral histories of mostly indigenous people in the Russian and Finnish North. Similarly to Helsinki, Stockholm or Oslo, which had their policies towards their northern indigenous minority (the Sámi), in the Soviet Union, the policies towards the Sámi were also conceived in the far-away political centre, namely Moscow. However, there was one big difference: whereas in the Nordic countries, the Sámi are the only ethnic group with indigenous status, Russia's North is inhabited by several dozens of indigenous minorities. We should bear in mind that in the Soviet Union there were no specific Sámi policies, but rather policies aimed simultaneously at *all* indigenous peoples of the North, with local variations (Berg-Nordlie 2015; Slezkine 1994). This was also the case in the sphere of education (Liarskaya 2013, 166). Accordingly, the lower levels of the state were responsible for the local implementation of these policies within 'their' respective minorities. The issues of schooling policy discussed in this article are based mainly on the example of the local RBS and the Russian Sámi. While they are, in many aspects, also valid for other indigenous groups in Russia's North, we must be aware that discrepancies in the ways in which centrally-decided policies were realised locally are considerable, and the sphere of education is no exception. ORHELIA aimed to explore how state policies that were decreed in faraway centres of political power were in turn implemented and dealt with locally in different field sites (Dudeck 2013; Allemann 2017; Laptander 2017; Lukin 2017; Stammeler, Ivanova, and Sidorova 2017). By exploring this question in the area of education policy, this article follows Lyarskaia's (2013, 167) request to have more analyses of particular educational situations in the North in order to compare different settings throughout the Soviet North and assess the de-facto heterogeneity behind the

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<sup>1</sup> Oral History of Empires by Elders in the Arctic, 2011-2015, financed by the Academy of Finland.

apparent homogeneity suggested by regulations. Finally, while I will focus on the reasons for the existence and ways of functioning of the RBS in Lovozero, this article will, at the same time, make a contribution to the generally scarcely known story of these schools, which were a pan-Soviet project and on this level had no connection whatsoever with the state's policies towards indigenous people.

The larger aim of the fieldwork within the ORHELIA project was to learn more about the consequences of social engineering (Holzlehner 2011; Scott 1998; Podgórecki, Alexander, and Shields 1996) by the Soviet state among its Northern minorities, through narrative interviewing combined with participant observation, and complemented by archival research. A significant part of this social engineering resulted in relocating large parts of the rural, and mostly but not exclusively indigenous population (Vakhtin 1992; Slezkine 1994; Anderson 1996; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001; Vitebsky 2002, 2010). In the case of Russian Lapland, mostly people from Sámi villages were relocated (Afanasyeva 2013; Allemann 2013; Gutsol, Vinogradova, and Samorukova 2007). In this project, we were potentially open to all topics we would encounter during fieldwork with elderly and middle-aged people, the majority of whom had an indigenous background. Across all our field sites, many of the people's accounts were connected to the relocations and their consequences. A part of these consequences are the experiences with boarding schools, which are present in most families. This is not surprising, as the dense network of NBS across the Soviet North marked the childhood and youth experiences of the majority of the native people of the USSR's North since the 1950s onwards (Liarskaya 2013, 2004; Bloch 2004). This is also reflected in the corpus of field data from the Kola Peninsula. It is important to mention that both positive and negative recollections of the school years co-exist, often even within the accounts of one and the same person. The Soviet educational system provided many indigenous people real chances for social mobility in a socialist society. While being aware that this social mobility was at the cost of language loss and acceptance of the majority culture, many interlocutors also express feelings of gratitude for the opportunities offered by the educational system. Joyful remembrance about the interaction with devoted educators and lasting friendships with pupils is very common too. By discussing the RBS and the ways in which it complemented the NBS, this article deliberately touches upon one particular example of educational exclusion and some extremely negative experiences of former pupils related to it, but I wish to raise awareness that by doing this I am examining only one aspect in the heterogeneous kaleidoscope of the Soviet educational policies in the North.

The RBS in Lovozero is one of the more sensitive and hidden topics. As opposed to the NBS, which was for intellectually ‘regular’ children, people did not immediately start to share with me stories about the RBS, as it bears the stigma of intellectual deficiency. Many former pupils of the RBS perceive their attendance at this school as an injustice that they prefer to keep to themselves. The topic is often silenced even within their own families and clearly belongs to the “unmentionables”, a set of “subdued presences and memories” (Konstantinov 2015, 138 f.), which becomes accessible only once the researcher has been part-time socialised in a specific social context and thus reaches that side of “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 2014; Allemann and Dudeck 2017).

While I believe that only locally confined, long-term qualitative research could bring to the fore the usually hidden topic of the RBS, this approach could not provide me with any evidence on whether similar situations existed elsewhere in the Soviet North. This has changed with a recent post on Facebook (Sulyandziga 2018) about a similar school and situation in Russia’s Far East, a post that I came across accidentally. Within the first three days, this post had gathered over one hundred reactions and thirty comments, most written by indigenous users from very different places across Russia’s North, about similar schools and experiences in their villages. This convinced me that there is a need across the Russian North for a broader discussion of remedial schools. As a reaction to this Facebook discussion, I published a collection of interview extracts on this topic (Allemann 2018), which I recommend as complementary material to this article.

## Research questions and aims

The research questions in this paper are: Why were there so many children in the boarding schools of Lovozero, a settlement in a region of the North where the sedentarisation of previously semi-nomadic families had been fully accomplished and where most parents of the boarding school pupils were living in the same village? What were the reasons for opening an additional boarding school for mentally disabled children, the RBS, which was almost half as large as the boarding school for ‘regular’ children, in a village and district with a comparatively small population, and in a region that was already saturated with such schools? The article thus has several aims: I will contribute to the knowledge about the history of boarding schooling of indigenous children in the Soviet North; I will uncover societal functions exerted by the boarding school system in Lovozero and its underlying power relations; and I will explore the little-known story of the Soviet remedial schools. Additionally, a more theory-related aim of the article is to show that the main theoretical approaches used in this article (Bourdieu and

Passeron 1990; Bourdieu and Champagne 1999; Goldner, Ritti, and Ference 1977) have a broad applicability and their use is not limited to explaining only those Western societies for which they were originally developed.

## Data, methods, theories

My approach of gathering oral histories is influenced by methods developed by oral historians (Allemann 2013, 10–28; Obertreis 2012; Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997, 140–47), combined with ethnographic fieldwork (Burgess 2002) during recurring stays in several settlements of Russian Lapland, mainly between 2013 and 2015. The main source of information is a corpus of over 90 hours of non-structured, open-ended narrative biographical interviews, or rather extended conversations. For this article, I used interviews with former teachers and pupils, both indigenous and non-indigenous. The large majority of the interviews have been transcribed, and part of them underwent a qualitative data analysis through detailed coding (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2013). I complement this main set of data with documents from archival research in 2014 at the State Archive of the Murmansk Region and other printed primary sources, such as articles from the local newspaper *Lovozerkaia Pravda*, official guidelines and regulations about remedial schools and formerly classified reports for administrative use.

The gathering and exploration of data was coined by a phenomenological, life-world oriented approach (Van Manen 2014), which is centred upon the experiences of the people whom I met during my fieldwork. In this inductive approach, I deliberately do not start from any pre-conceived theory nor hypothesis before having my research data gathered; in an open-ended explorative approach, this would bear the risk of epistemic blindness or confirmation bias (Gubrium and Holstein 2014). However, after the concrete experiences in the field and the first sifting through of the data, I use existing theories in order to complement, confirm and adjust my own insights and obtain a more fine-grained analysis. In this process, existing theories can be confirmed, extended or modified. This complementarity is not uncommon, but it is rarely addressed: deduction and induction should not be seen as mutually exclusive but as complementary (Mayring 2002). In this interaction between theory and data, of special importance for explaining the topic of this paper proved to be the following theoretical approaches.

Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) "Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture" and Bourdieu and Champagne's (1999) "Outcasts on the inside" are important for understanding

the mechanisms of and reasons for exclusion in educational systems. While their findings and theories are based on fieldwork and statistics of French schools, many of their insights have validity for other societies too. For example, monolingualism as an imposed standard for society is a common trait of many major countries, beyond ideological differences; France and the late Soviet Union are prime examples of this. Besides, the works of these authors explicitly address the subversiveness of the processes of educational exclusion and thus their central but concealed contribution to the reproduction of social order. It is therefore especially eye-opening to apply them on highly inclusive schooling systems such as the one in the Soviet Union. The concept of reproduction works against vague ideas of the “demise of class”, be it in the idealistic belief of the dynamism of the American society, which was criticised at the time of Bourdieu and Passeron’s study (1990, ix), or the declared classlessness of socialist societies, as I show in this article. Besides that, Bourdieu’s and Passeron’s book is an example of the explicitly addressed combination of deduction and induction (1990, xviii), as I have posited above.

Seminal for my research in general and for this paper in particular has been Goldner, Ritti, and Ference’s (1977) little-known study on what they call “the production of cynical knowledge in organizations”. Using the example of the Catholic Church in the United States, they pose some claims with broader applicability about tacit knowledge and actions by agents that are against the publicly stated goals of the entities they work in. The authors conclude that cynical knowledge can exist in potentially any organisation, but the best grounds for it to flourish are found in entities with a strong collective and teleological ideology and declared altruistic goals. My analysis confirms that many elements of their theory on cynical knowledge can be operative also in a completely different social and ideological system than the one they analysed.

## Previous studies

On the RBS in Lovozero there is already a preliminary inquiry by Allemann and Dudeck (2017). Although the RBS is taken as a starting point for reflections on questions of research ethics, the article is complementary with the present paper, as it gives a lengthy quotation in English from a narration by a former pupil, something for which there was no space in the present paper. A larger selection of interview extracts in Russian was compiled by Allemann (2018). An overview of boarding school systems for indigenous children across all circumpolar countries is given by Krömer and Allemann (2016), including an evaluation of the similarities and differences between them. A good entrance to the topic of Northern boarding schools in

the Soviet Union is given in Vakhtin's (1992) concise overview of the history of the indigenous peoples of the North. It broaches the nexus of relocation and boarding schools, and it offers insights into the social problems created by emphasising views about the coercive aspects of state power. Newer works about the relationship between indigenous people and the state during Soviet times, one of the most recent being Konstantinov (2015), pay more attention to the grassroots agency by the people and uncover previously overlooked instances of negotiation. Elena Khlinovskaya Rockhill's (2010, 2004) study of residential schooling and state parenthood in the non-indigenous setting of a city in Russia's North-East is significant for seeing the state parenthood discourse as a pan-Russian/pan-Soviet phenomenon; it helps thus to avoid linking state parenthood too narrowly to questions of indigeneity and ethnic assimilation, but rather more broadly to the state's dealing with (and construction of) "failed families". Specifically regarding boarding schooling among indigenous minorities in Russia and the Soviet Union, of fundamental importance are Elena Liarskaya's publications on boarding schools for Nenets children on the Yamal Peninsula (2013, 2004; 2003, in some of her literature spelled Liarskaia). While giving a very good overview and analysis of the general history of Soviet Northern boarding schools, the author also acknowledges that Yamal, for a complex set of reasons, stands out as a rather felicitous example of the relation between boarding schools and the local indigenous people. Alexia Bloch's (2004) notable study of boarding schooling among Evenk children tries to avoid a simplifying oppressor-oppressed dichotomy and focuses on questions of experience and of negotiated power relations. The works of Bartels and Bartels (1995, 1998, 2006) on Soviet boarding schools for indigenous children also emphasise processes of negotiation over the view of pure coercion. An indiscriminately grim picture of boarding schools is drawn both in shorter works such as Sarv (1996), by statements as "[the children] were force fed Russian food", and in larger works as Yuri Slezkine's (1994) widely-quoted book about Russia and its Northern indigenous minorities; for instance, the author points out that "no other policy met with as much bitterness, hostility, and resistance" and "the task of the schools was to turn out little Russians" (1994, 237). While catchy statements like these should not be dismissed as completely wrong and can apply to particular situations, they suggest a state authority based only on coercion, oppression and assimilation. However, as shown by Liarskaia (2013; 2003), the Soviet educational policy in the North was full of contradictory tendencies, ranging from language autonomy to linguistic assimilation, from affirmative action to exclusion. The more fine-grained views of research based on ethnographic fieldwork, compared with works based on other methods, confirm that



the full range of varieties of how to deal with educational constraints and opportunities becomes visible only through close interaction with the people concerned.

### Lovozero as a centre of boarding schooling

Lovozero is the administrative centre of the eponymous district of the Murmansk Region and the village where most of the Russian Sámi live today. This was not always the case and is the result of a chain of developments during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first wave of resettlements from their traditional *siyts* (a Sámi form of semi-nomadic settlement) happened in the context of collectivisation in the 1930s. After the war, mainly during the 1960s and 1970s, Khrushchev's policy of agricultural consolidation (*ukrupnenie*) as well as the needs of the Soviet military, industry and infrastructure projects provoked almost the whole eastern part of the Kola Peninsula to be emptied of civilian settlements, most of which happened to be predominantly Sámi settlements. People were relocated primarily to Lovozero. There is a rough estimate that 70 to 80% of the whole Sámi population in Russia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century had to resettle due to state measures at least once in their lifetime (Bogdanov 2000). The large number of villages closed down (see Afanasyeva 2013, 31 for an almost complete overview), as well as the accounts from fieldwork interlocutors, confirm this estimate by and large (fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015). Today Lovozero is widely known as the 'capital city' of the Sámi of Russia because most of the Russian Sámi live there. Yet, to call it a capital is misleading because only about 20% of the population of Lovozero are Sámi (Rantala 1995). Before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lovozero had been a small Sámi settlement, without any above-average importance. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lovozero became a village inhabited by a majority of Komi and some Nenets (Ushakov and Dashchinskii 1988, 104, 108), due to a wave of immigration (Mankova 2018; Bruno 2016, 121–69). Since the Soviet times, and especially during late socialism, Lovozero's population was completed by a steadily growing share of incoming population from the rest of the Soviet Union. With the relocations, the Sámi again became a significant group in Lovozero, though not the majority (Gutsol, Vinogradova, and Samorukova 2007, 48). Thus, since the 1960-70s, the high inter-ethnic Sámi/Komi/Nenets/Soviet-incomers differentiation of the vast lands of the Murmansk Region has been concentrated on the tiny territory of Lovozero, with a considerable share of ethnic mixing. The Sámi had not previously lived together in such large numbers, and yet they are a minority in their new 'capital', contrary to their previous settlements in which they were majorities.

My research concentrates on the 1970s and 1980s, when the last resettlements were completed. Many villagers remember this time as relatively stable, or even prosperous, compared to the times before (collectivisation, war, relocations) and after (*perestroika*, post-Soviet times) (Allemann 2017). However, we also know that considerable social ills resulting from those relocations undermine the superficial image of stability and calmness. While the first Sámi resettled to Lovozero (from Chudz''iavr in 1959) experienced fewer problems, the later ones (Voron'e 1963 and Varzino 1969) met serious housing and job difficulties after their relocation (Gutsol, Vinogradova, and Samorukova 2007, 53). A struggle for local resources, mainly housing and jobs, began between the locals and the resettled, whereby in terms of power relations there evolved a local, not formally acknowledged hierarchy with Russians/incomers on the top, Komi on the middle, and Sámi and Nenets on the bottom layer as a result of both the greater evolutionary ideological discourse on ethnicities and the local history of migrations (about the view of the Komi as "natural allies" and of the Russians as "leading nation" see Slezkine 1994, 58, 101, 120, 152; fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015; Bruno 2016, 121–69). In Lovozero, the district village administration and the local reindeer herding state farm (*sovkhos*) always remained dominated by Russians and Komi (Overland and Berg-Nordlie 2012, 22; fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015). As one of my informants put it, Lovozero is not a balloon that could be blown up infinitely (Interview by author with an elderly Sámi woman, Murmansk Region, 2008).<sup>2</sup> In this light, it is not astonishing that, once they arrived in Lovozero, the relocated people found themselves at the social bottom.

From the late 1950s onwards, more and more children, mostly Sámi or Komi, were placed in one of the boarding schools, which were all state-run in Soviet times. The larger part of displaced Sámi people settled down in Lovozero, and hence their children attended one of the schools of Lovozero. From 1960, Lovozero had two schools: the regular day school and the NBS (Executive Committee of the Lovozero District Soviet of Workers' Deputies 1960). In 1970 a third school, the RBS, was opened (Executive Committee of the Lovozero District Soviet of Workers' Deputies 1970). While this article focuses mainly on this last school, some words need to be said on the NBS too, for the sake of proper contextualisation. Called in Russian *natsional'naia shkola-internat*, "national" stood for the official Soviet terminology for

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of anonymity, no more exact references are given for this and all following cited interviews. Due to the small population of Sámi people in Russia, the indication of age and settlement could lead to the identification of the interviewee.

ethnic/indigenous/native (cf. Konstantinov 2015, 91). The specific components of the NBS comprised mainly two things: additional lessons in material aspects of the local non-Russian cultures, i.e. Sámi and Komi handicraft (fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015), and from the end of the 1970s also additional Sámi language courses (Overland and Berg-Nordlie 2012, 63–65).

It is important to mention that in the multi-ethnic village of Lovozero there has never been any strict ethnic segregation and, as in the rest of the country, there was social mobility beyond ethnic boundaries, with certain limits towards the top levels. The most visible marker of division between the daytime and the boarding schools is what has been called the “tundra-connectedness” of people, which is only loosely related to ethnicity and indigeness and includes indigenous and quasi- or para-indigenous people (cf. Konstantinov 2009, 2015, 31–38, 313, 329). This tundra-connectedness can be subdivided into two categories: First, children from families who lived in other, remote villages of the Kola Peninsula without their own school or road connection (Kanevka, Krasnoshchel’e and Sosnovka as the only such settlements remaining after the several waves of village liquidation and relocation). Second, children of families who lived in Lovozero – be it as their home village since generations or due to recent relocation – but whose parents were employed in the *sovkhos* and working out in the tundra on long-term shifts of up to several months. Both cases potentially comprised children of any ethnicity, however, in most cases with Sámi and/or Komi roots. Additionally, the boarding schools that were previously attended by children labelled as difficult transferred within the country’s residential schooling system from other parts of the Murmansk or neighbouring regions.

So far, these patterns correspond to the general situation in boarding schools across the Russian North, wherever children of tundra-connected people would enter schooling (cf. Bloch 2004; Liarskaia 2003; Slezkine 1994; Ssorin-Chaikov 2003). However, there is one important feature that needs further clarification: Many children from tundra-connected families lived in the boarding school although both or one of their parents or other closest caretakers were permanently living in the same village as the school. Throughout this article, I will call this phenomenon the *boarding school paradox*. It is a deviance from the common-sense but not always correct reasoning that a boarding school in the Soviet North gave education and shelter to children whose parents were, for whatever reason, far away at least seasonally (cf. Bartels and Bartels 1995, 61). It thus, at first glance, may appear as a paradoxical situation when parents live in the same village. Although the boarding school paradox was not common to all

places in the Soviet North where there was residential schooling, it is certainly not unique to Lovozero. It has been mentioned by Vakhtin (1992, 22) as an issue pertaining to places across the whole Soviet North, it has been noticed on Yamal by Liarskaya (2013, 160 f., 165) and in Lovozero by Konstantinov (2015, 148 f., 274), but it has so far not been looked into as a separate research question in the context of schools for indigenous and quasi-indigenous children of the North. It should be also noted that the separation of children from their parents – independently of their place of residence – has been a common practice in the not specifically indigenous context of “deviance” (*otklonenie*) of children (both “backward” and “gifted”) or parents (so-called “problem families” – *neblagopouchnaia sem'ia*) across the whole country, as there was neither a policy of inclusion of such children nor of support of such parents (Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2010).

My research indicates that physically healthy indigenous and quasi-indigenous children in the Soviet North were confronted with at least two different types of boarding schooling: the system designed for children with a nomadic or semi-nomadic background, epitomised in Lovozero by the NBS; and the countrywide system for mentally “deviant” children, officially unrelated to ethnic markers, epitomised in Lovozero by the RBS. The two boarding schools in Lovozero stand for these two systems and reasons of boarding schooling. However, they also show us how these two systems mingled, with deviance and indigenesness becoming blurred.

In Lovozero, the group of boarding school children with their parents living in the same village consisted mostly of Sámi children, in contrast to the generally ethnically mixed composition of the village. Komi children were concerned as well, but their distribution between the boarding and the daytime schools of the settlement was more even (according to statistics that will be referred to below). In the last section of this paper I will return to the causes of the boarding school paradox. Before that, I shall outline now in more detail what the RBS in Lovozero was about.

### The remedial boarding school

“Remedial school” was a shorter – and euphemistic – term for the institution’s official naming “special basic school for mentally retarded children” (Ministerstvo prosveshcheniia SSSR 1979). While the opening year of the NBS (1960) coincided with the beginning of the large-scale relocations, the opening of the RBS in 1970 happened together with the last relocations of inhabitants of closed-down villages to Lovozero. This is a noteworthy fact and no random coincidence, as I will argue below based on ethnographic and archival data. As already

mentioned, the history of the RBS lies under a layer of silence caused by stigma and shame. It took me some time to become aware of the salience of this school in the lives of most boarding school pupils in Lovozero who grew up in that time. The RBS's existence in Lovozero (it was closed in the early 1990s) is a case in point for the discrepancy between policies created in far-away centres, conceived to be uniform and countrywide, and the peculiarities of the local implementation, often adapted to serve local institutional needs, or sometimes even private needs of those in charge.

In 1970 there were twelve remedial schools all over the Murmansk Region (Education Committee of the Murmansk Region 1970). With the opening of the new RBS in Lovozero there appeared a suddenly increased number of places for “oligophrenic-moronic children” (*deti oligofreny-debily*, in the terminology of that time, Zabramnaia et al. 1971) for the eponymous district, and these places had to be filled. The official numbers for the school year 1975-76 show that 287 children from the whole district attended the NBS and 132 children the RBS (Executive Committee of the Lovozero District Soviet of Workers' Deputies 1975). The Lovozero district had about 11900 and the village of Lovozero as its administrative centre about 3600 inhabitants at the time (TsSU RSFSR, Stat. upr. Murm. obl. 1975).

Biographical interviews with former pupils of this school and with its former principal as well as archival data have shown that the new school was quickly filled mostly by sending there children aged between seven and nine years, many of whom were Sámi (fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015; Commission on public education and culture 1970, 1973, 1974). While this age category was consistent with according guidelines (Ministerstvo prosveshcheniia SSSR 1974a, point 1), the ethnic over-representation of Sámi cannot be explained by any countrywide guidelines and requires a closer look into the local circumstances in Lovozero. A yearly assessment was carried out by a group of experts representing the majority society called medical-pedagogical or sometimes medical-psychological commission (henceforth MPC), arriving from the regional centre and visiting in Lovozero only the NBS, not the daytime school. The MPC's task was to test children's mental development using countrywide questionnaires (Ministerstvo prosveshcheniia SSSR 1974b; Zabramnaia et al. 1971; cf. Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2010, 11). These questionnaires were not adapted to local forms of knowledge and took an urbanised and Russianised upbringing for granted. Another factor in the decision-making of the MPC were the language abilities and speech development of the tested children, only in the Russian language and not taking into consideration that some

children were growing up also with other languages (for more details, see the discussion section of this article).

Decisions in favour of the remedial school were motivated mainly by the true or alleged lack of factual knowledge, logical abilities and below-average knowledge of the Russian language. These were forms of knowledge that were supposed to be present in the heads of all Soviet seven to nine-year-old children. In the opinions of many interlocutors, including the former school principal, this interpretation of mental disability was too broad (fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015). As one interviewee put it, failure was not only due to the questions asked, but also to the psychological pressure put on a small child in this unusual situation, standing alone in front of an MPC of unknown people coming from a large city (Interview by author with a middle-aged Sámi woman, Murmansk Region, 2013). The issues of pressure and wrong assessments are mentioned in some of the literature of the time, with the conclusion that “there happen cases of wrong appointments to remedial schools” (Zabramnaia et al. 1971, 1). However, the way of checking children through the MPC was not fundamentally questioned.

Against the official prescriptions (Ministerstvo prosveshcheniia SSSR 1974b, point 7), it was common for children to be tested by the commission without the parents’ or other caretakers’ presence (Interview by author with a former teacher, Murmansk Region, 2015, and with a former pupil, Murmansk Region, 2013). Parents of concerned children were often working in the tundra at the time of the MPC’s appearance and were not available, or they were not aware of the seriousness of the situation due to low literacy and/or their own issues connected to the relocations, such as employment, housing, or alcohol abuse problems (see more on this in the discussion section). The lack of a strong parental background forming a counterweight to the MPC’s rulings is an additional reason for the over-representation of tundra-connected Sámi families in the RBS. Once a decision had been made to transfer a child to the remedial school, it was difficult, albeit not impossible, to return to regular school. A lot depended on the agency of parents. There are reported cases of children who were lucky because their parents or other relatives were in town during the MPC’s activities, grasped the seriousness of the situation, and could successfully influence or even reverse the MPC’s decision (Executive Committee of the Lovozero District Soviet of Workers’ Deputies 1976). However, parents’ resistance could also be met with a clear parent-state confrontation: for instance, a mother was fined 30 roubles for inciting her child not to go “to this *debilka*”, which was the school’s nickname, well-known

to this day in Lovozero (Commission on under-age affairs of the Lovozero District Executive Committee 1975a).

The curriculum of this school was slower, with shorter lessons, shorter days and longer breaks, and at the end of their eight-year tuition, children had an education equivalent to four years of regular elementary schooling (Bogatyreva 1978; Ministerstvo prosveshcheniia SSSR 1979). The consequences for children who attended the remedial school were heavy: they were stigmatised officially (because of their school diploma) and socially as “morons” (*debily*); former pupils had difficulties in the labour market; they had no access to many forms of further education – however, they could gain access through an upgrade to a regular school diploma by visiting an evening school for adults, which some of my interlocutors did; and boys were exempted from military service, which was often perceived as shameful (fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015). A detailed analysis of individual trauma and reactions to it lies outside the scope of this article, and it shall suffice here to mention that, according to my corpus of interviews, individual reactions to stigma ranged from leaving the settlement upon graduation to suicide.

### Discussion: The nexus of relocation and boarding schooling

The distribution of Sámi children to the boarding schools in Lovozero clearly correlates with the relocation history of their families, as resettlement had primarily concerned villages predominantly inhabited by Sámi (Gutsol, Vinogradova, and Samorukova 2007). In other words, the boarding school paradox mainly concerned Sámi children from relocated families, as they were almost invariably sent to one of the boarding schools; children of local, non-relocated families were, in contrast, sent to the regular school (fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015). The correlation between relocation and boarding school suggests at first glance that the relocated families were still seen as non-locals, outsiders, as if they were still living in another village, and their children should be hence sent to the boarding school in Lovozero.

This is insofar true as the relocated population was not properly socially integrated into the new setting. This manifested itself in a complex of social problems, which perpetuated one another over time (Konstantinov 2015, 88–90, 148 f.; Afanasyeva 2013; Allemann 2013; Gutsol, Vinogradova, and Samorukova 2007) and are so closely interrelated with the boarding school paradox that they need to be shortly outlined here. These problems were: housing

shortage, lack of occupation; alcohol abuse, increased non-natural deaths and dysfunctional families.

*Housing shortage:* The relocated people were supposed to live from the beginning in well-equipped, newly built apartments. This was what they had been promised in their old settlements, and often what had made people agree to the proposal to move to the new village and vote for dismantling their old village (Interview by author with an elderly Sámi woman, Murmansk Region, 2013; Village assembly of Voron'e 1962). Despite all the shortcomings compared to the single-family houses common in the closed-down settlements, an apartment was regarded by many as a desirable increase in comfort: it had electricity, gas and running water. However, many of the relocated people had to wait for several years for their buildings to be completed. In the meanwhile, they had to find solutions on their own, relying on relatives and friends and depending on the goodwill of the local villagers. Even after many years of waiting for the new buildings to be completed, the new blocks were only partially inhabited by the relocated people. In some instances, the new housing earmarked for the relocated people was distributed among local villagers, and their old respective houses, which were in very poor condition, were handed over to the displaced people (Kolkhoz "Tundra" 1968). In many cases, several families had to share a small space (Vatonena 1989a mentions 16 people in a two-room house; many similar accounts in my corpus of interviews). Decades after the relocations, the square metre per head statistics of living space in Lovozero still significantly differed depending on ethnicity, and were lower-than-average for Sámi people (Vatonena 1989a). These statistics not only prove the lower social status of these outsiders, they also signal the high psychological pressure on people living in these narrow quarters. This, in turn, provoked further social ills and thus perpetuated the marginalisation of these groups.

*Lack of occupation:* There is a well-known Soviet saying: "We are pretending that we are working, and you are pretending that you are paying us." Although in the Soviet Union employment was guaranteed and in Lovozero formal occupation was offered to all relocated people, in fact for many of the relocated there was little work, and they would often receive the worst-paid jobs within the local *sovkhozy* (fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015). There were official motives for such a distribution of labour: the collective farms of the villages closed down had to make a formal request to be merged with the bigger farms in Lovozero due to unprofitability (Executive Committee of the Lovozero District Soviet of Workers' Deputies 1968). This made the relocations look voluntary and put the newcomers into the position of applicants who were asking to be relocated and obtain new housing and



jobs. The relocations to Lovozero were the last step towards the full sedentarisation of the Sámi population. It was arguably a question of prestige to be the region of the Soviet North which had gone the furthest with sedentarisation (Bogoiavlenskii 1985, 92–93; Eidlitz Kuoljok 1985, 127). This entailed the final transition from herding as a way of life to herding as a purely professional occupation: the tundra became only a workspace, not a place of residence. Fewer and fewer women were travelling to the tundra, where mainly men were employed. The only women officially needed in the tundra were the professional housewives (*chumrabortnitsa*), and even the fewer and fewer women willing to take this job would often stay in the village for months. Village and tundra became thus gendered spaces all over the Soviet/Russian North (Povoroznyuk, Habeck, and Vaté 2010; Ssorin-Chaikov 2003, 183–85; Tuisku 2001; Vitebsky 2010; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001).

Alcohol abuse, increasing non-natural deaths, dysfunctional families: The precarious occupational and housing conditions led to increased distress expressed in family problems, alcohol abuse and violence, including higher than average non-natural death causes such as accidents, alcoholic intoxication, suicide and murder (Vatonena 1989a). According to different sources, during the 1970s between 50 and 80% of all deaths of Sámi men aged between 20 and 54 years (which in the North count as the years of professional activity due to the retirement age of 55) stemmed from such causes. Sociological reports for the local administration (Dobrov, Toichkina, and Korchak 1985; Bogoiavlenskii 1985), which at the time were for confidential use only, show that these problems were known but not publicly addressed as widespread social ills. There were numerous cases of “problem families” when parents were sent to forced medical treatment and confinement to so-called 'prophylactic medical labour camps' (*lechebno-trudovye profilatorii*, LTP), the parental rights terminated and children removed from families (fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015; Allemann 2014; Commission on under-age affairs of the Lovozero District Executive Committee 1973a, 1975b). However, the practice of placing children in boarding schools concerned way more children than only those of families officially deprived of parental rights, which can be seen from the absolute numbers of children placed in these schools. Alcohol abuse in families could affect the physical and mental development of children and their school performance, and thus be an additional factor in the increased probability of failing in front of the MPC, a concern which was indeed expressed by medical staff at the time, however without pointing at the societal reasons behind “parental alcoholism” (Shamlan 1973).

With this background knowledge about social problems as a consequence of relocations, I will try now to resolve the different dimensions of the boarding school paradox. All the mentioned factors put together – the housing shortage, the lack of occupation, family distress due to alcohol abuse and violence – contributed to a specific local interpretation of the criteria for sending children *a priori* to the NBS and, in a further step, a part of them to the RBS. This local practice acquired a non-explicitly addressed and yet very clear ethnic dimension: children from relocated Sámi families were placed in the NBS and in the RBS more often than average.

### The individualisation of social problems

While most relocated families were subject to the practice of sending children to one of the boarding schools, the punishment of parents for poor parenting became more formalised and visible when de-facto joblessness and/or drinking came into play. The welfare system of the Soviet state was concentrated on supporting only the children, not families as a whole. The child was seen as an innocent non-agent who had to be parented by those who would be able to make of that child a most useful member of society. The family, instead, was seen as interchangeable if it proved not to be suitable for this task (cf. Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2010, 13, 26 f., 52, 156 f.). In such cases, children would usually be handed over to state parenting, i.e. sent to a boarding school or orphanage, the ultimate measure being the legal termination of the parental rights of the biological parents. In Lovozero, the relocated groups of Sámi were clearly the most affected by this policy. Most commonly, the state officials who enforce this policy of child protection target those who are struggling with the most serious social problems and at the same time have the least economic (material and financial assets), cultural (knowledge, intellectual skills, education), social (network, group belonging) and symbolic (prestige and honour) resources (Bourdieu 2002) in order to fence off the unpredictable infalls of the officials or to meet their requirements. Bourdieu and Champagne (1999) found that children from the most deprived families, especially those with an immigrant background, are often left on their own when it comes to decisions about their future, and they remain most dependent on the enactments by the schools, or simply on chance and mischance. In Lovozero, this fully applies to the relocated groups (fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015; Commission on under-age affairs of the Lovozero District Executive Committee 1973a, 1975b).

In bigger cities, the investigation of individual families by government officials was and is rather arbitrary and dependent on tips by neighbours, medical personnel or other people (Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2010, 2004). In the small settlement of Lovozero, however, the system

had a clearly defined target group (the relocated people), and social control was great not only due to the small population, but also due to the monolithic employment structure (one main employer, the local *sovkhos*). The target group was clearly defined for several reasons: First, due to the real social problems mentioned above and encountered by this group; second, due to their weak embeddedness in the local village population. This meant on one hand that for them there was no network to rely on, in a society where informal networks are of crucial importance; on the other hand, being outsiders in the village, they were treated by locals not only with pity, but also with prejudices and as potential competitors for resources (fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015). The policy of child removal from families to the boarding schools started to be publicly contested on a local level only in a 1989 article named “Who needs the boarding schools!?” positing that “we give birth to children for our own joy, and not for the state” (Vatonena 1989b).

The long-standing “reveal, admonish, excommunicate” pattern (cited after Kharkhordin 1999 in Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2010, 264) was aimed at punishing and, as a consequence, stigmatising the adults for deviance from official moral values and protecting the children from those deviants. In practice, it was a stigmatisation of both generations: Children whose parents had been stigmatised in a modern form of public pillorying through the local newspaper (“Zakharova should be ashamed,” Rochev 1985)<sup>3</sup> would be often bullied in school by their peers, and also the teachers’ attitudes towards them could change for the worse (fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015). Besides that, the stigmatisation through exclusion within a generally rather inclusive educational system is more stigmatising than *a priori* exclusion from the system, because the excluded ones were apparently given “their chance”: failure thus can be more easily attributed to individual deficiency, while maintaining the façade of a society of equals (Bourdieu and Champagne 1999).

The social ills of the relocated population, mostly Sámi, were the ultimate consequence of a failed large-scale experiment of social engineering resulting in “indigenous villagization” (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003, 5). This experiment aimed to make tundra-connected people live in one compact place of dwelling (*mesto kompaktnogo prozhivaniia*) (Allemann 2013, 80) due the reasons mentioned above. Increased alcoholism and despondency in families were a real consequence, which in turn could indeed have a negative influence on the physical and mental development of children. In this sense, the RBS was a reactive state measure to a previous

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<sup>3</sup> The surnames in the article reflect the mentioned Komi-Sámi hierarchy: Rochev is a Komi surname, he was the author of the article and chairman of the comrade’s court; Zakharova is a widespread Sámi surname.

failed state policy. However, the over-eager child removal to boarding schools and appointments to the RBS show us that there was a clearly visible strategy aimed at making the evident social ills appear as personal failures – a phenomenon that has been observed by many scholars, starting from Max Weber (discussed in Bourdieu 1971) and Foucault (2013), and specifically about the Soviet Union by Conquest (1967), Madison (1968), Fitzpatrick (1993), Kharkhordin (1999), Halfin (2003), Argounova-Low (2007) and Khlinovskaya Rockhill (2010). I call this process the *individualisation of the negative*. While I concentrate here on how failures of social engineering state policies were presented as individual failures, we should not forget that processes in which its successes were celebrated as common achievements were numerous too and would deserve a separate inquiry. One could call the corresponding antonym *communalisation of the positive*.

Successful individualisation of the negative meant that the state, which had the declared aim of creating a new society, could not be blamed for failures and setbacks on the way to its achievement – despite existing knowledge about such failures of state policies, both on the basis among those concerned and in the hierarchy of power. This is what Goldner, Ritti, and Ference (1977, 540) call *cynical knowledge*: “The idealized concept of the organization needs to be protected by mechanisms that will inhibit free and open communication concerning issues which tend to counter idealistic belief. [...] We shall use the term ‘cynical knowledge’ to describe knowledge that presumably altruistic actions or procedures of the organization actually serve the purpose of maintaining the legitimacy of existing authority.” Withholding cynical knowledge can be realised through explanations offered ‘from above’, but also self-made explanations by members of the hierarchy to legitimise their membership. Cynical knowledge was withheld as long as withholding it would better serve the goals of people involved in various levels of power and possessing this knowledge.

This changed with the new discursive frame offered by the policy of *perestroika*, when for many people it became an interesting and viable option to unleash previously withheld cynical knowledge. Independently from each other, and using different terminologies, Goldner, Ritti et al. (1977) and Yurchak (2006) have shown these strikingly similar opening processes in the Catholic Church and the Soviet Communist Party respectively. Meant as a necessary vent, the discussion fora created by reforms quickly developed their own dynamics and went out of control: cynical knowledge became both the cause and effect of changes. Leaving priesthood or leaving the party, speaking up against practices of perceived injustice and making cynical knowledge public was not anymore perceived as incommensurable with making a living and

remaining an accepted member of society. It unexpectedly became a viable option. In the case of Lovozero, this is epitomised by the not uncommon metamorphosis from a Soviet ideological worker or teacher to an indigenous activist (Konstantinov 2015, 66–95). It was this discursive and political change, both on a country-wide level and locally, that made it possible to speak up against the cynical practices of remedial schooling in Lovozero and arguably contributed to the closure of the RBS at the beginning of the 1990s. The detailed – and certainly multiple – reasons why the school was closed are not the focus of this article. However, mentioning the dynamics of the *perestroika* time is relevant here because the social problems I describe in this article were a typical source of that slowly accumulating cynical knowledge which formed the basis for engaging at a later point in the new discursive frames offered by *perestroika*.

The examples of the “reveal, admonish, excommunicate” pattern by state officials towards relocated Sámi parents in Lovozero confirm that the state’s strategy<sup>4</sup> of individualising failure is especially easy to accomplish in entities with a strong collective and teleological ideology (communism in my case, the Catholic Church in the case of Goldner, Ritti, and Ference) and declared altruistic goals (accordingly, creating an egalitarian society or offering salvation). In such a setting, individualism is not desirable and therefore deviance from the norm easily turned against the deviants by the non-deviants, in a permanent attempt of self-asserting oneself of being on the right way towards the achievement of the declared goal. Vertical and non-transparent power structures (such as the MPC or police officers assessing family dysfunctionalities) as well as an informational monopoly (such as the public pillorying of deviants) help to implement the strategy.

In the following two sections, I will turn to two especially subversive instances of cynical knowledge that contribute to explaining the multiple reasons for the boarding school paradox. It lies in the nature of their topic that there are no official documents confirming this cynical knowledge. I have heard about it in personal conversations with field partners, and partially in the media of the *perestroika* times. Despite all the cynicism uncovered, it is important to keep in mind that cynical knowledge and altruistic convictions are not mutually exclusive. Sincerely meant altruistic devotion and self-interest could co-exist as motivational patterns in the actions of, for example, teachers.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘State’ in the Soviet Union has a very wide meaning, well beyond ‘government’, and close to ‘society’: Alongside with the bureaucratic vertical edifice, mechanisms of power rested also with ‘ordinary’ people through mutual surveillance, self-identification and self-indoctrination (Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2010, 19). This is why when I personalise the state, here we can include the responsible actors of lower ranks of representation of state power, such as teachers.

### The alleviation of the housing problem

As shown above, in relocated families, poor housing conditions were common. With such poor housing conditions and the state's slow building of new housing, separating the children from their parents and sending them to one of the two boarding schools turned out to be an effective, although unofficial, instrument to alleviate the housing problem. Given the widespread relocations and following housing shortage throughout the Soviet North (Vakhtin 1992), we can assume that this dimension of the boarding school paradox played a role not only in Lovozero. There are strong indications that raising the housing area per head was a tacitly acknowledged side effect of placing children in boarding schools (Vatonena 1990; fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015). While this certainly produced better statistics about the living area per person and in some cases indeed eased the precarious housing situation of some families, it would be fairer to solve the housing problems by building houses. Obviously, the sole official purpose of boarding schools remained to give children tailor-made tuition.

By moving children who have their parents in the same settlement to one of the boarding schools, the state was not marked as incapable to offer the promised housing, but rather parents were declared as incapable for bringing up their children, which is another instance of the individualisation of the negative. As Goldner, Ritti, and Ference (1977, 547) put it: "When knowledge was closely controlled by the hierarchy, discussions were likely to be concerned with idiosyncratic weaknesses of individuals." Instances of such discussions controlled by the hierarchy are the denouncing newspaper articles mentioned above. Only much later, in the radically different discourse of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, these processes were to be addressed publicly. An article published in 1990 in the local newspaper *Lovozerskaia Pravda* puts it in a nutshell:

"A.E. Zakharova, one of those who came from Varzino [one of the liquidated Sámi settlements], lives in a shack on the school's territory where she works as a cleaning lady. For 20 years they haven't been able to find proper housing for her, and 16 years ago they the state took guardianship over her children without termination of parental rights due to the fact that she didn't have housing. It proved easier to take away the children than to give housing" (Vatonena 1990).

### The school as a resource for those employed in the system

Fieldwork partners assume (Interviews by author with two middle-aged Sámi women and one middle-aged Sámi man, Murmansk Region, 2013) that the remedial school in Lovozero was opened for the sake of the development of the institution itself and its main beneficiaries, who, in a view marked by cynical knowledge, would be the employees, not the children. This is the second instance of difficult-to-prove cynical knowledge presented in this article. It is a strong

insinuation, and without written evidence it is legitimate to doubt it. The most authoritative source in this case is my interview with the former principal of the school (Interview by author with an elderly Sámi woman, Murmansk Region, 2014). She broached the topic herself and confirmed this opinion, which I had heard more than once from former pupils: Occupational opportunities, higher wages and more holidays for the more demanding work with – truly or allegedly – disabled children were strong incentives to open such a school and to keep it running.

The former principal of the school, at the time of interviewing 82 years old, being indigenous herself, is an example of the considerable social mobility offered by the Soviet educational system. This mobility was at the price of full acceptance of the habitus inculcated through the educational system about what should be accepted as legitimate culture. By this full acceptance, and as long as no viable alternative to the chosen career was available, she expressed her indebtedness to the educational system, which had made her career possible (cf. Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 31, 95), by withholding (and accumulating) her cynical knowledge about the concealed RBS' functions. These functions, which she talked about during my fieldwork with her, could be subsumed under the formula “children for the institution” instead of “institution for the children”. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, 95) put it, “the newly recruited teachers, anxious to show themselves worthy of their ‘high-speed promotion’, doubtlessly found themselves more inclined to adopt the outward signs of traditional mastery than to make the effort to adjust their teaching to the real competences of their public.” With the opening and discursive turn since the mid-1980s, many teachers, among whom also the mentioned indigenous school principal, showed a radical change of mind, started decrying the situation and engaging in ethnic activism and linguistic revivalism (cf. Liarskaya 2013, 166). For many locals, such 180-degree turns by people who wielded power over them looked opportunistic (fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015). However, if we bear in mind that cynical knowledge was withheld by these actors due to systemic constraints, this ‘opportunism’ can be seen more neutrally: as the appearance of new potential opportunities for a viable change of direction in one’s life journey without having to withhold anymore information about social injustice. One’s career was not at stake anymore by going public with formerly cynical knowledge.

Additionally, we can draw on existing research about other places and times reporting instances when personal economic interests of involved actors contribute to keeping an educational institution alive. Khlinovskaya Rockhill (2010, 178) finds similar evidence in her inquiry about

residential care in a post-Soviet setting. Klemm (2010, 11–31) came to similar conclusions about the German educational system for mentally challenged children: “The practice of coupling special education diagnostics to the allocation of resources, with the implicit incentive to keep the number of pupils with special pedagogic needs high, should be given up” (11; translation by L.A.). The author raises awareness of the fact that the diagnosis and segregation of children with special needs can be influenced by the economic interest to keep up or expand existing occupational structures.<sup>5</sup> We can see such parallels in comparison with Sámi children in Norway, where – despite completely different ideological grounds – unjustified child removal or appointments to schools for mentally disabled children were also a result of power relations (Schjetne 2006; Minde 2003, 130 f.). These parallels between educational settings in different regions and periods show us two things: that in the sphere of education, the economic interests of involved actors can be to the detriment of children; and, as Khlinovskaya Rockhill (2010, 8) aptly noted, that in spite of ideological and social differences to ‘the West’, there have been considerable commonalities between Western countries and the Soviet Union in questions of child welfare and institutional education if they are approached through the analytical prism of power relations.

#### [Towards a Soviet people: Centralism and ethnocentrism](#)

It has been shown in previous research that the Russification of institutions had begun already in the 1930s (Martin 2001, 403–31; Kotljarchuk 2017, 107–13); in the sphere of education it was resumed and intensified in the 1950s and reached its peak in the 1970s, as a result of the coincidence of several decrees and speeches by the party leadership, and the dynamics triggered by them (Liarskaya 2013, 160–65; Liarskaia 2003, 45, 57, 59, 68, 92–94; Vakhtin 2003). In the case of the RBS, the cultural and linguistic Russification was visible from the sample questions in the countrywide guidelines, which were assuming the same type of Russianised and urbanised upbringing for all children all over the country; an example is the task to name three words related to “oak” (Zabramnaia et al. 1971, 50), something rather difficult for a child growing up where there are no oaks. Although it would be easy to adapt such tasks to local idiosyncrasies (for example in this case by replacing “oak” with “birch”), interviews indicate that such an adaptation did not happen, contrary to psychological tests in the 1920s and 30s, when local adaptation was still required (Liarskaia 2003, 54). One interviewee recounts how she had to describe a parrot, something not necessarily evident for a

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<sup>5</sup> A counter-example is Italy, where, in an attempt to increase social cohesion, the segregation of children with special needs in separate classes and schools has been abolished by law as early as 1977, prescribing their inclusive tuition in regular classes (Allemann-Ghionda 2013, 134).



first-grader who did not go to kindergarten and who grew up in a Northern rural setting without television or other mass media (Interview by author with a middle-aged Sámi woman, Murmansk Region, 2013; recommended sample questions for MPCs see Zabramnaia et al. 1971, 49–57). The authors of these guidelines also note that “regular children” give more eloquent answers than “retarded children”; for example, they maintain that a “regular child’s” typical answer to the task to describe an elephant would be: “Elephants are very big animals. They have a long trunk and big ears. They live in India and in Africa. They are big, grey and look a bit clumsy.” A “retarded child” would give less wordy, less precise and less correct answers such as: “Elephants are brown, have a big nose and paws” (Zabramnaia et al. 1971, 43 f.). The MPCs in Lovozero applied the categorisations offered by guidelines in a formalistic way, not taking into consideration the eventuality that a non-urban child may have never had a chance to see even a depiction of an elephant, a parrot, an oak or whatever ‘strange thing’. This is probably also due to the hybridity of Lovozero as a settlement: on one hand, it has an urban ‘face’ and is easily reachable from the regional capital, where the MPC did arrive from; the territorial compactness and density of the population of the Murmansk Region causes an absence of feelings of remoteness, compared to the vaster areas more to the east of Russia. On the other hand, Lovozero is the gateway to the most remote parts of the Murmansk Region and had only recently become the final destination for the relocated people from the ‘tundra side’ of the Kola Peninsula. It is possible that the MPC’s members, not being locals, were not fully aware of this less visible side of Lovozero.

Closely connected to the testing of factual knowledge was the language assessment by the MPC. It also concerns questions of centralisation and sovietisation: full command of Russian language was a basic assumption in all mentioned guidelines and directives for the MPC, and insufficient language knowledge as a possible factor in the wrong assessment of a child’s intellectual development was not given space for any discussion. According to the definitions used in the assessments, developmental retardation consisted, among other things, in slower speech development, including “agrammatical constructions” and “phonetic deviance”, and at the same time the guidelines suggest that it is hard to detect all those properties: “Some moronic children’s intellectual and speech impairment is so slight that it is not immediately detected” (Zabramnaia et al. 1971, 8–10). Thus, slight shades of impairment are admitted and, simultaneously, a strict line between “moronic” and “non-moronic” children is created. This duality gave the MPC the power to issue rulings on vague grounds. On this borderline, language skills take on a crucial role. The markers of “speech of oligophrenic children” are

defined as short sentences, limited vocabulary, low level of abstracting and generalising vocabulary, and slower phonetic development (Zabramnaia et al. 1971, 50). What is not taken into account is that such markers can also hold true for children not speaking in their primary language or sociolect; growing up with more than one language can entail a slower speech development too. Today we know that such delays are only temporary and are eventually outweighed by the advantages of multilingualism: the knowledge of more than one language, and the development of certain cognitive skills (Allemann-Ghionda 2013, 67–124). However, such insights were not yet widespread in the place and the epoch discussed in this article, and monolingualism counted as the most advantageous learning environment. Among children from the recently relocated families, growing up with Sámi language and not having visited a kindergarten was still widespread. This incongruence between the factual and the desired linguistic situation unequally predisposed children to the mastery of the school education requirements with their imposed “cultural arbitrary” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 43). As in the Soviet educational system of that time, monolingualism was taken for granted, for the MPC it was more obvious to interpret deviance from the monolinguist paradigm in the “moron/non-moron” frame. For the pupils, possessing the ‘right’ linguistic capital became a decisive asset in the first years of schooling (Allemann and Dudeck 2017, 4–5). The pattern in Lovozero corresponded to what Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, 116) called “one of the best-hidden mediations through which the relationship [...] between social origin and scholastic achievement is set up.”

Cultural and ethnic dimensions playing a role in the diagnosis of mental disability – not intended by written regulations but locally developing certain dynamics in terms of social reproduction – are certainly not unique to Lovozero. The problem was mentioned by Vakhtin (2001, 242–43) relating to the Soviet North, and Germany again can serve as a contemporary example: children with a migration background are statistically over-represented in “special classes” (the German term and institution corresponding to the Soviet “remedial classes”) due to the fact that “special needs” are diagnosed too hastily instead of prescribing additional linguistic tuition. Given the assumption of monolingualism as a norm, deviance from this norm is framed as deficiency (Allemann-Ghionda 2013, 139). It is the “monolingual habitus” (Gogolin 1994) – present in a majority of modern nation states – which made the attribution of mental disability a matter of ethnocentrism, presumably inadvertently for many of the persons involved.

### Paternalism as structural racism

The common underlying ethnic dimensions of the discussed patterns of the individualisation of the negative, exclusion and reproduction of social order in Lovozero can be subsumed under the term of structural or societal racism (cf. Vaught and Castagno 2008; Gillborn 2015). An additional important element of societal racism in the Soviet setting was benevolent paternalism. This was reflected both in rules and in opinions. Examples of rules are: there was the so-called 'zero class', a pre-school introductory year for those children who were considered not adapted enough to a Russified and urbanised setting. The idea behind the zero class was not racism but to adapt the children to the settlement conditions, to make their education more successful in a different cultural setting. There were directives to send all children of Sámi and Komi ethnicity to the zero class (Lovozero boarding school administration 1970). The concealed structural racist dimension comes into play when recognising the fact that the zero class was not only a way to make children more successful in their education, but it was also a straight way into the boarding school, regardless of the living situation of the parents: As the zero class was only offered in the NBS, this was an additional *a priori* reason to leave Sámi and Komi children in this school after the completion of the zero grade and the beginning of the general curriculum. This is another piece in the puzzle of the boarding school paradox. Once a child was already at the NBS due to the zero class, it required some personal effort to transfer a child to the daytime school; much was dependent on the varying agency and social standing of parents and the child. There were many families in which some siblings went to one of the boarding schools and some to the daytime school, without anyone being able to recall any strict rule (fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015) – because there was, in fact, no strict rule. Another case in which negotiations came into play was that of the numerous families of mixed ethnicity (fieldwork by author, Murmansk Region, 2013-2015).

There is also another instance of the ethnic dimension that the remedial schooling system acquired locally: the MPC, as already mentioned, was examining *en masse* only the children at the NBS, whereas children from the regular daytime school were tested only in rare cases, after individual pre-selection by teachers as suggested in guidelines (Zabramnaia et al. 1971). Underlying ethnicity-related prejudices (Taguieff 2001), so well concealed behind the curtain of benevolent paternalism that in most cases they went unnoticed by the actors themselves, were also present among the teaching personnel, such as the statement in a report by the principal of the NBS Tairov: “Our children whom we recruit to our boarding school have their own psychological peculiarities, they are slower, less developed, but they are not transgressors”

(Commission on under-age affairs of the Lovozero District Executive Committee 1973b). Such opinions were supported in scientific surveys and political discourse across the entire Soviet North (Vakhtin 1992).

We can subsume: sending children to the zero class, which was located in the NBS, was guided by rules. Leaving them after the pre-school year in the NBS was seen as an obvious solution but was not a rigid rule. To test children of indigenous ethnic background *en masse* for mental disability was also not a written rule but a practice. We can recognise in these practices patterns of societal racism precisely because the actors were not following rigid rules but motivational patterns within a discursive frame of paternalistic benevolence.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to explain the reasons for what I have called the boarding school paradox: the fact – mentioned but not systematically analysed by previous scholarship – that many indigenous children in the Soviet North, mainly in the 1960s and 1970s, went to a boarding school despite having their parents living in the same settlement. While some of the cited literature suggests that this was a widespread phenomenon in the Soviet North, I tried to look into the details on the example of Lovozero, which is particularly apt for explaining this phenomenon due to its strongest degree of sedentarisation among all regions of the Soviet North. I thereby gave special attention to the remedial boarding school (RBS) and the social construction of mentally disabled children along ethnic markers, in spite of remedial schools being a pan-Soviet institution with no declared ethnic component. The RBS existed in Lovozero alongside with the native boarding school (NBS), which had officially an ethnic component, and which I also discussed on the sidelines of the present article. The RBS was roughly half as large as the NBS. That the described issues with the RBS in Lovozero are not an isolated case became visible in an impressive manner through the recent Facebook discussion mentioned at the beginning of the article.

To explain the boarding school paradox, I drew mainly upon my own collected field experiences and materials as well as the concepts of *exclusion* and *social reproduction* by Bourdieu, Champagne and Passeron (1990; 1999) and of *cynical knowledge* by Goldner, Ritti and Ference (1977). Humane intentions and cynical reasons are intricately interconnected, as they were all fostered by the educational system that pupils and teachers found themselves in. I concentrated in this article on an educational situation where cynical action has been outlined

by field partners as especially blatant. However, this does not mean that ‘noble’ and cynical reasons could not *simultaneously* be drivers of involved personnel’s actions.

The reasons for the boarding school paradox are multiple. Firstly, I explained that the strong degree of sedentarisation stands not in a paradoxical but in a causal relationship to boarding schooling: as a result of several forms of social engineering, a large number of people of mainly Sámi origin, had to settle down in Lovozero, which created a housing shortage and related social problems for decades. One of the ways to alleviate the housing problem was to send children to the boarding schools. I see in this an instance of what I call the *individualisation of the negative*: the tendency by the state to present failures of social experiments as personal failures of selected individuals (deviants), in this case both the parents and children of relocated families. It does so mainly by using its monopoly over the flow of information (the local newspaper articles and classified reports cited above). By saying state, I include all actors who represented some forms of state power. This also includes teachers and other people responsible for opening and running the RBS. Without denying that there was also a sincere wish to help children who were not succeeding well enough in the regular curriculum, I claim that these actors participated – some more consciously, some less – in implementing the individualisation of the negative by withholding knowledge on those reasons for the boarding school paradox, which went beyond individual fallibility and deviance. These reasons included the attenuation of the housing shortage and the economic self-interest of running the school. Tacit knowledge about these reasons is what I called in this article cynical knowledge.

Additional reasons for the boarding school paradox include the declared goal of creating a Soviet people, which resulted in increased centralism and ethnocentrism. In mature socialist times, Sovietisation amounted to linguistic and cultural Russification, with the dismissal of cultural and linguistic diversity. As a result of this, Komi and Sámi children were a priori to be sent to the NBS, which was the only school offering the zero class – a pre-school year, which was compulsory for all indigenous and para-indigenous children in order to raise their level of Russian language command. While the way to boarding schooling was paved through the zero class constraint (independently of the parents’ place of residence), the further appointment to the RBS also acquired an ethnic dimension through the simple fact that the medical-psychological commission (MPC) routinely visited only the NBS and not the regular daytime school, thus performing a pre-selection along ethnic lines. This points at both structural racism and an awareness of the increased level of distress among those children and their families, which in turn was also a form of cynical knowledge. The paternalistic and benevolent pattern

behind this selection, sincerely meant by many of the teaching personnel, helped to disguise the underlying societal racism, which many involved actors were not aware of themselves. This form of societal racism had the function of social reproduction: it perpetuated the local social order, in which the relocated groups were at the bottom. These were “the conservative functions of the supposedly liberating school system” (Bourdieu and Champagne 1999, 422).

Repressive methods emphasising individual responsibility for failure intensified over the 1970s, which supports the view that it was a reaction to the problems caused by unsuccessful social experiments. I have shown earlier (Allemann 2017) that this time is remembered by many people as a relatively stable time, even a ‘Golden Age’ of altruism and collective successes: we could call this the commonalisation of success. Individualisation of the negative should not be seen as a contradiction to this: the problematic aspects of the society of that time were marginalised by presenting them as individual failures.

The analysed instances of educational and social exclusion happened in an otherwise highly inclusive and “liberating” educational system. This is also not a contradiction. The Soviet educational system indeed gave many indigenous people opportunities for social mobility. Many recollections about the boarding schools are full of joy and gratitude for the opportunities they offered. However, these opportunities were given at the price of de-facto ethnic depreciation: the upwards mobility was possible only under the condition of full acceptance of the imposed cultural arbitrary of the dominating society. This full acceptance was simultaneously a matter of personal choice, in form of docility and submission within the rules set by the educational system, and of lack of viable alternatives, as the story of exclusion presented here has shown.

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